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SUBJECT: STUDENTS' VIEWS ON CANDIDATES' FOREIGN POLICY

SUMMARY

¶1. In an informal survey of college students, we found that the majority of students acknowledged the importance of foreign policy in the upcoming presidential election. Most, however, appeared to be utterly uninformed about the candidates' policies. This outcome likely reflects the conscious decision of the candidates to de-emphasize foreign policy issues relative to domestic concerns. END SUMMARY.

THE SURVEY

¶2. Between June 21 and July 5, Political Section interns surveyed 83 college students about their views on the upcoming elections. We canvassed students from some of the ROK's most prestigious universities, including Ewha University, Korea University, Seoul National University, Sogang University, Yonsei University and the Korea Foreign Language University.

FOREIGN POLICY AS A MEANS OF COOPERATION

¶3. Most students, 55 out of 83, agreed that the foreign policy of a candidate would play an important role in determining support for that candidate. The two most common reasons were that the ROK had to cooperate with the surrounding superpowers to overcome the imbalance of security, and that the ROK's domestic policy hinged upon foreign policy, especially in the trade sector. Some, however, believed that foreign policy was inconsequential. Representative of this group, a Seoul National University political science student argued that the president could not be held responsible for Korea's foreign policy. "We have powerful neighbors who act independently of Korea's interests," she said. Accordingly, she was more interested in the president's domestic agenda, which the president could control.

FOREIGN POLICY MUST CONTRIBUTE TO NATIONAL INTEREST

¶4. In answering a question about which country was most

important to Korea's foreign policy, an overwhelming majority answered USA, followed by the DPRK and China respectively. "Whenever I see the word foreign policy, I immediately think about which nation matters most to Korea's economic well-being? My answer is America," remarked a 25-year-old female graduate student of Seoul National University. A Chinese major at Sogang University replied that she chose China because China would eventually become Korea's largest trade partner.

CONTROVERSY ON UNCONDITIONAL AID

¶5. When it came to foreign policy towards the DPRK, two-thirds of all respondents criticized the ROKG's unconditional aid policy. Of the critics, half wanted to discontinue all aid, while the other half with a middle-ground approach wanted to implement conditional aid. Some responded that unconditional aid was a strategy for maintaining an ROK-DPRK relationship independent of other powers. "I am against the Sunshine Policy as it is now, but I think humanitarian aid should continue with some kind of monitoring or negotiation," replied a Korea University student. "What I detest more is discontinuing aid just because of US pressure on nuclear weapons."

LACK OF INFORMATION ON FOREIGN POLICY

¶6. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents said that they did not know the foreign policy of any of the candidates. Among the informed students, more knew about Lee Myung-bak's foreign than Park Geun-hye's. "I don't look for who has the best foreign policy among the candidates," said a recent graduate of Ewha Women's University, "I prefer Lee, so I know more about his opinions including his foreign policy than about other candidates' opinions." A student at Korea University said, "I do not know the concrete details of Lee and Park's foreign policy, but the direction of their policy is predictable based on their political party." However, a graduate student at Korea University disagreed: "None of the candidates' foreign policy can be predicted based on their party. Lee and Park now suggest foreign policy agendas not unlike the candidates from the left. I have no idea what their foreign policy is even if I know the policy line of GNP."

COMMENT

¶7. Somewhat fatalistically, most students believed that the foreign policy of the candidates mattered only in those areas in which the ROK itself could promote change, such as in North Korea. However, with regard to the ROK's North Korea policy, students were generally critical of unconditional aid. This finding tracks other polls noting the growing conservatism of ROK youth.

¶8. This report was drafted by Embassy intern Jee-hye Kim.

STANTON